PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 20 Number 8 July 2023

FIELD TRIP: Sunday, 16th July 2023, 6.45AM: Mokila. Meeting Points: NMDC, Masab Tank, 5.00AM; Sri Guru Raghavendra Udipi Hotel, near Telangana State Police Academy, 5.30AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Sathwik Reddy (Mobile: 99858-07186)

Mokila is a dry-deciduous scrub habitat which offers rich birding. Please come, enjoy a Sunday outing, and watch some lovely birds.

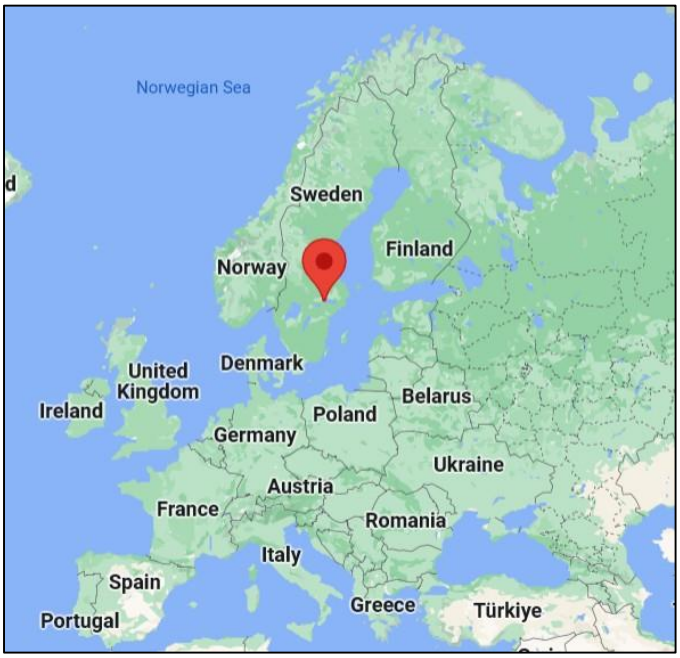
This will be a half-day trip, so carry adequate water and breakfast/snacks, and protective gear if required. Strict Covid protocols will be followed; please ensure you wear masks, carry a sanitiser and maintain social distancing. Non-members are most welcome; however, they are requested to contribute Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty.

INDOOR MEETING: Saturday, 29th July 2023, 6.30PM: Talk by Dr Asad Rahmani, Former Director, BNHS: History Of Natural History Writing. Venue: Vidyaranya High School, opposite Secretariat. Coordinator(s): JVD Moorty (Mobile: 98494-70411), Sathwik Reddy (Mobile: 99858-07186)

Dr Asad Rahmani is a renowned ornithologist, a highly respected authority in his field and a popular speaker. This promises to be a very interesting and entertaining talk.

STOCKHOLM CITY BIRDING
Report: Stockholm, Sweden, March 2023

Text & Photos: Dr Krishna Nagarajan



Sweden, almost surrounded by icy seas

Work required me to travel to Vasteras, a small town about 100km west of Stockholm in Sweden, during the week of March 6th, 2023. As shown in the map, Sweden is located in the northern part of Europe and, if you ask me, it has only two types of weather: either "Winter is here" or "Winter is coming"!

March happens to be the time when they have the “Winter is still here” kind of weather. The temperature is typically around 0º Celsius, and as luck would have it, during my visit it was predominantly below 0º Celsius.

Although I have never birded in such cold weather conditions, I did survive severe winters during my younger days when I was living abroad. But I was hoping for a sunny winter day wherein I could do some birding. I checked the eBird website and was happy to note that there are quite a few birding enthusiasts in Sweden and, even in the peak of winter, sightings were listed in both Vasteras and Stockholm.

On the first day in Vasteras, when I stepped out in the morning to visit the customer’s office for my meetings, it was so cold that my whole body was shivering in spite of wearing layered clothing that I purchased from our local Decathlon store. I noticed some birds while walking to the bus stop and my first thought was “how do these birds survive such cold conditions? No wonder they migrate to the south to escape the weather.”

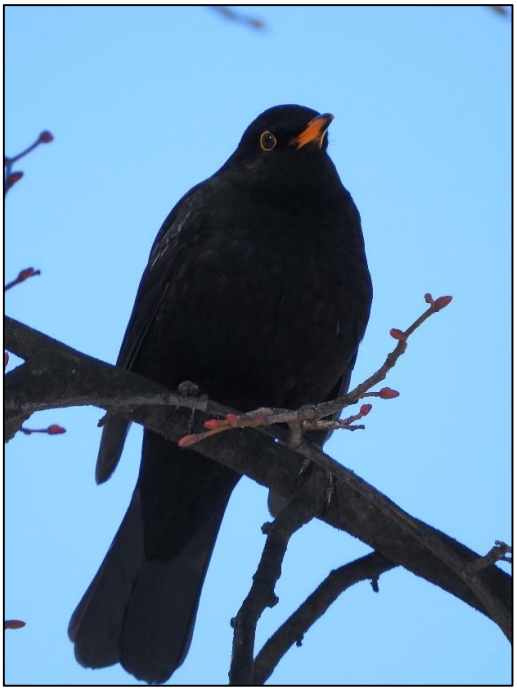
Eurasian Jackdaw

I spotted many interesting birds like Eurasian Jackdaw, Eurasian Magpie, Hooded Crow, Bohemian Waxwing, Fieldfare, House Sparrow, and Common Wood Pigeon across the road. I was carrying my camera but when I tried to take some pictures, my fingers were so numb that I was unable to click the shutter. And when I finally managed to take a couple of pictures, my camera gave up, complaining that the fully charged battery could not handle the -7ºC temperature and was exhausted. So now, besides keeping myself warm, I also needed to keep my camera warm by hiding it inside my winter jacket!

Using the binoculars presented some other challenges. My fingers were simply unable to adjust the focus to properly view the birds. Reality kind of hit me on my face – techniques that work in our good old, laid-back, warmer Hyderabad will not work in Sweden.

That was not all though. On the third day, it snowed heavily. All the greenery I could see during my first two days disappeared. It was replaced by a white carpet made of snow. It was a beautiful sight but I was now doubtful whether I would be able to do any birding at all. You need to look both down and up to spot birds. If you don’t look down then there is a very good chance you will slip on the ice and fall down. I had my travel/health insurance but had no intention of utilizing it during my stay there!

After I finished my meetings in Vasteras, I shifted base to Stockholm for the weekend and to eventually fly out from the Arlanda International Airport. The temperature in Stockholm was still -6ºC to -2ºC, but on Sunday the elements finally decided to take pity on me and gifted a beautiful sunny day. The sunlight made the sub-zero temperature bearable. So I decided against visiting the museums and immediately located a nearby hotspot on eBird – Kungsträdgården – City Centre Park. The park is next to the river, Nordstrom, which attracts many birds in the area.

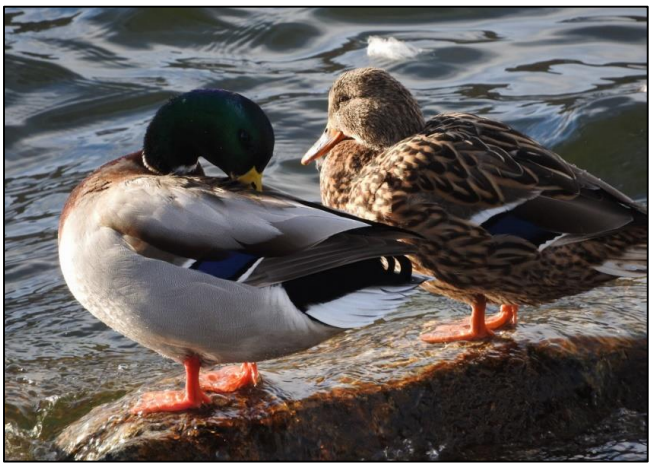


Eurasian Blackbird

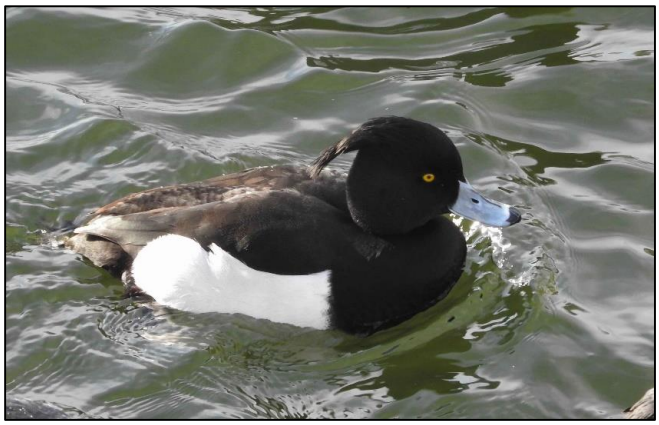
Eurasian Magpie

Hooded Crow

I went to the city centre park by 8:00AM Sunday morning at -7ºC, and obviously it was deserted. I spotted Eurasian Blackbird, Eurasian Magpie, Hooded Crow, House Sparrow, White-tailed Eagle, Great Tit, and our friendly neighbourhood Blue Rock Pigeons in the snow-covered park.



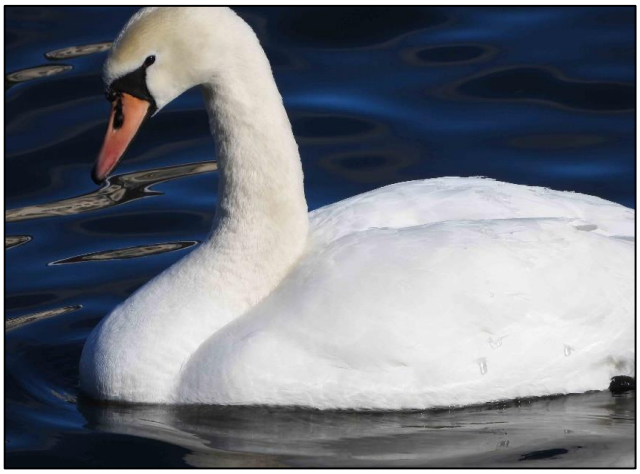
Mallard pair



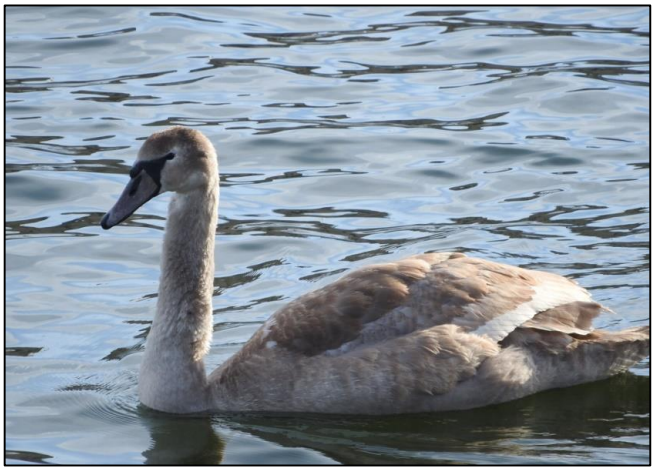
Tufted Duck

Black-headed Gull with leg ring

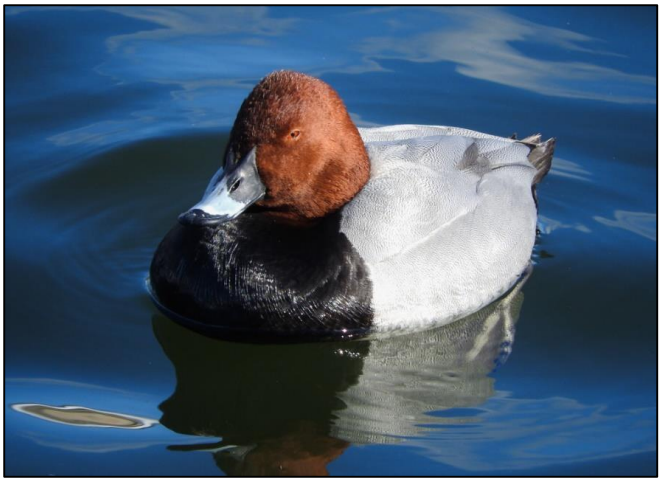
When I walked across the street to the river, I was rewarded by a large flock of birds: Mallard (male and female), Eurasian Coot, Tufted Duck and Black-Headed Gull (with leg ring).



Mute Swan adult

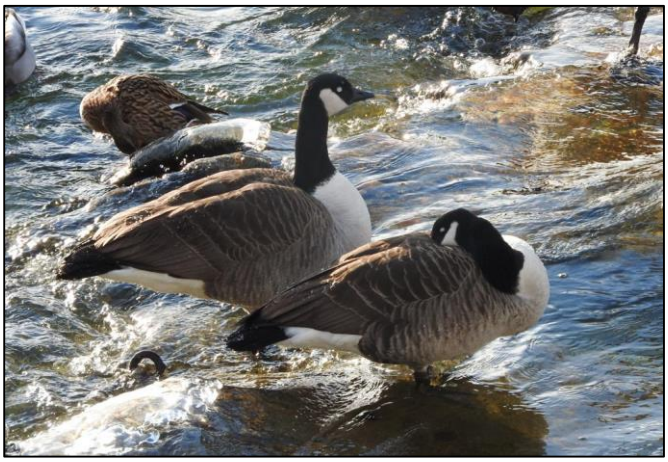


Mute Swan juvenile

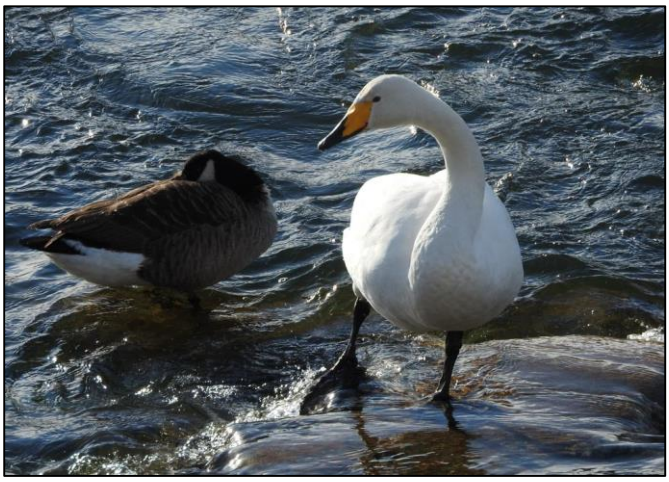


Common Pochard

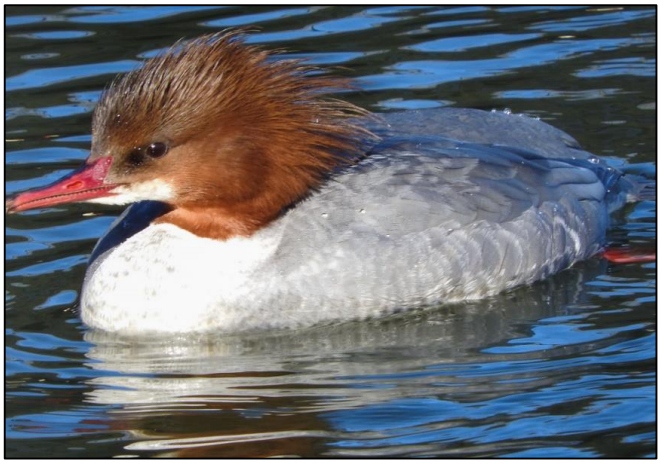
Mute Swan, Common Pochard, Common Goldeneye, Common Gull, Canada Goose, Great Cormorant, Common Tern, Whooper Swan, Common Merganser (Female), Herring Gull, and Lesser Black-backed Gull were also there.



Canada Goose



Whooper Swan



Common Merganser

Great Black-backed Gull

I crossed the river via the bridge and did some more birding. I was able to spot the Great Black-backed Gull and the Great Cormorant. I saw several Mallards, Tufted Ducks, and Hooded Crows as well and by this time I was no longer in a position to take repeat pictures.

The temperature was below 0º Celsius throughout the Sunday and I wrapped up my birding by noon and headed back to the hotel.

Stockholm is a beautiful, colorful city devoid of any modern high-rise buildings. Many of these buildings were more than 100 years old. If you remember the history, Sweden did not participate in the World War II – it was a neutral country. Therefore, unlike other capital cities in Europe, it was not destroyed and could retain the old charm. I was hoping to spot more birds but the snow and the weather limited the amount of birding I could do. Nevertheless, birding in such cold temperatures was fun and I am grateful for whatever birding I was able to do during my brief stay in the city.

The list of birds seen during the trip is given below:

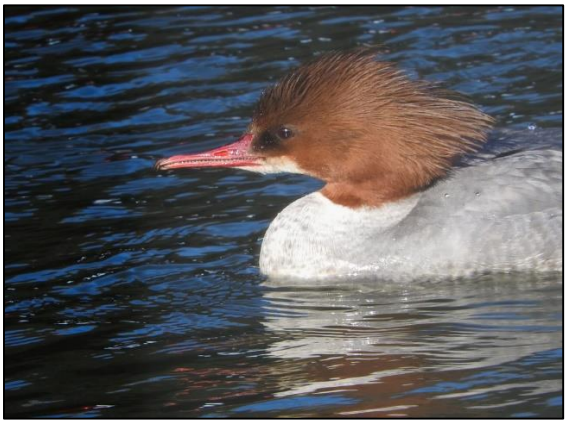
Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Eurasian Jackdaw	*Corvus monedula*	15	Mute Swan	*Cygnus olor*
2	Eurasian Magpie	*Pica pica*	16	Common Pochard	*Aythya ferina*
3	Hooded Crow	*Corvus cornix*	17	Common Goldeneye	*Bucephala clangula*
4	Bohemian Waxwing	*Bombycilla garrulus*	18	Common Gull	*Larus canus*
5	Great Tit	*Parus major*	19	Canada Goose	*Branta canadensis*
6	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	20	Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*
7	Fieldfare	*Turdus pilaris*	21	Eurasian Blackbird	*Turdus merula*
8	Common Wood Pigeon	*Columba palumbus*	22	Whooper Swan	*Cygnus cygnus*
9	Blue Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	23	Common Merganser	*Mergus merganser*
10	Mallard	*Anas platyrhynchos*	24	European Herring Gull	*Larus argentatus*
11	Eurasian Coot	*Fulica atra*	25	Great Black-backed Gull	*Larus marinus*
12	Tufted Duck	*Aythya fuligula*	26	Lesser Black-backed Gull	*Larus fuscus*
13	Black-headed Gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*	27	White-tailed Eagle	*Haliaeetus albicilla*
14	Common Tern	*Sterna hirundo*			

Some other photos taken during the trip:

Black-headed Gull first-winter

Herring Gull

Bohemian Waxwing



Common Merganser

Blue Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Coot

Common Wood Pigeon

Fieldfare

House Sparrow

Herring Gull first-winter

Eurasian Magpie

Hooded Crow

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THE LIVING AIR by AASHEESH PITTIE
Report: Book Launch, Hyderabad, June 16, 2023
JVD Moorty

Aasheesh reading a passage from the book (Photo: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao)

The Living Air: The Pleasures of Birds and Birdwatching, a book by our erstwhile President and fellow-birder, author, and editor, Aasheesh Pittie was launched on the premises of Goethe-Zentrum, Hyderabad on June 16, 2023.

Aasheesh Pittie is currently the editor of the ornithological journal 'Indian Birds'. His penmanship has brought out books such as *Birds in Books*: *Three Hundred Years of South Asian Ornithology* and *The Written Bird: Birds in Books 2*, apart from a compilation of a searchable bibliographic database of over 35,000 works on South Asian ornithology.

Amita Desai addressing the audience (Photo: JVD Moorty)

Proceedings started with Ms. Amita Desai, Director of Goethe Zentrum, introducing the author and briefly speaking about his twin passions of birding and writing. Ms. Anita Mani, publisher of the said book was also on stage to speak briefly about her organisation and also her personal impressions about *The Living Air*, followed by the formal book release.

Aasheesh invited MS Kulkarni, Shafaat Ulla and yours truly to join him and jointly release the book, a very brief and emotional occasion for us to share the stage with Aasheesh.

The book launch (Photo courtesy: JVD Moorty)

Aasheesh Pittie, Anita Mani & Sita Reddy (L to R)
(Photo: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao)

The launch was followed by a discussion between the author and Sita Reddy, a writer, researcher, and curator whose recent work on nature has focused on the cultural histories of flora plants, trees, forests, gardens, landscapes, and ecosystems.

Sita Reddy, in her opening remarks, said that the book wasn't just a book on birding, but a book on nature writing, something that Mark Cocker, British author, naturalist and environmentalist, also mentions in the foreword. She remarked that the book belongs to that category of authors on nature writing such as EH Aitkin, Rachel Carson, Dr Salim Ali, M Krishnan to name just a few of them.

A section of the audience (Photo courtesy: JVD Moorty)

There was also, of course, a lively interaction with the audience in a more-than-the-capacity filled hall. The first question was with regard to the title of the book, taken from the lines of English poet William Wordsworth's poem 'Lines composed few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798':

"…And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;…"

Aasheesh explained how these words impacted him, and how mankind is focussed chiefly on terra firma and not on what's above it, namely the air around. His interest in nature was kindled when in Class IX/X the prescribed book for literature then was titled *'The Jungle Picture'* by Norah Burke, which painted a picture of the vast forests of India, along the foot-hills of the Himalayas, in 22 short stories. The other book that inspired him was Salim Ali's The Book of Indian Birds which he described as "sublime". A small list of books he has read and recommends for reading to everyone was also shared by him.

Asked to elaborate upon the phrase 'birding by ear' or 'seeing by song', Aasheesh spoke on how one can enjoy birds by listening to them, as many birds are often heard more than seen. Even the urban chaos is not a deterrent to hearing a bird call overhead or in a bush, and knowing it is there gives a peculiar thrill to the birder knowing that (s)he has 'recognised' the bird amidst all that tumult. He said that interest in music brought out how silence between notes in music starkly contrasts with the notes and enhances the beauty of the musical piece.

Sita Reddy asked him about the choice of illustrations by Sangeeta Kadur rather than photographs. Aasheesh remarked that it would have been a complete mismatch of his prose and the picture, as the artist here was sketching something in the same way that the author was drawing with words.

Aasheesh interacting with the audience
(Photo: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao)

The attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities, known as anthropomorphism, was considered important for a written piece on birds to rouse the interest of the reader. Aasheesh paid tribute to the late Mr Siraj Taher and the author's late father by reading out to the audience an excerpt from the chapter 'S is for Shikra'. It was heartening to note a reference made to the late Mr Pushp Kumar, top official in the Forest Department then and a mentor to some of the senior birders of today.

Aasheesh spoke with great feeling and a just a trace of irritation on 'birding tourism' and the habits and practices of 'intrusive birding' prevalent today. He decried this behaviour and attitude in no uncertain terms.

Questions from the audience were interesting, ranging from the common-place "where have the sparrows and the crows gone" to more interesting ones like "which of the musical interludes in birdsong is closer to the author, Hindustani classical or Western classical?" Aasheesh professed his preference for Hindustani classical, but also shared an anecdote of a duet between a Cello and a Nightingale recorded live in the 60s by the BBC.

Another good query was on whether the birds have, over time, shown behavioral changes to rapid urbanisation; this was answered with examples cited from around us, and also how the bird calls have a higher decibel level to drown out the city noises than was earlier. The questioner continued with how increased usage of artificial lighting has altered the behaviour of birds, the response to this being that this is an aspect that is still being studied, though studies in migration have shown significant effects on bird behaviour and numbers.

A concerned young birder's query on "how to interact closely with birds" elicited an amusing response "… don't interact with them, just watch them."

A query on why new species aren't being discovered elicited the reply that wide distribution makes them more visible to the humans all over the earth, apart from their largish size.

The last questions of the evening were on the transition from birdwatching to bird photography to E-birding, and secondly how the book could serve to reach out to the policy makers to help in awareness and conservation. Aasheesh was of the view that photography does indeed help in birdwatching, but censured those who do not follow the ethics of bird photography by giving space to the bird; happily the trend is changing, he observed. He opined that the book could help if there were to be empathy amongst the policy makers and the administrators.

This was followed by Aasheesh signing copies of the book, put up for sale by the publisher at the venue.

A lively evening interspersed with reminiscences, anecdotes, readings, questions and answers drew to a close with a loud and sustained round of applause.

The interview is available at the URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9b5SaPGrvPU

Aasheesh with members of Deccan Birders (Photo courtesy: JVD Moorty)

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Trip Report: Nehru Zoological Park, Hyderabad, May 21, 2023

Gokul Krishna Addanki

The group present at the walk (Photo: Gokul Krishna Addanki)

On Sunday, May 21, 2023, we had a wonderful bird walk organized by Deccan Birders at the Nehru Zoological Park. It was a pretty good sized gathering with about 50 people, including around 10 kids, turning up for this walk. DB had taken special permissions from the FD to accommodate this walk which started at 6:00AM.

We entered the Zoo full of energy and enthusiasm, and were immediately greeted with few Rose-ringed Parakeets, crows and babblers. The kids were overjoyed and showing each other every bird that they saw.

Yellow-billed Babbler (Photo: Gokul Krishna Addanki)

The sun was still very easy on us and we proceeded to walk a little further down the road towards the Butterfly Park (which was closed as it still was not business time). We saw some egrets, sunbirds & Scaly-breasted Munias flocking around the flowers and giving some poses for the few photographers in the group; a lot of us were Binocular birdwatchers.

Great Egret (Photo: Gokul Krishna Addanki)

Purple Sunbird (Photo: Gokul Krishna Addanki)

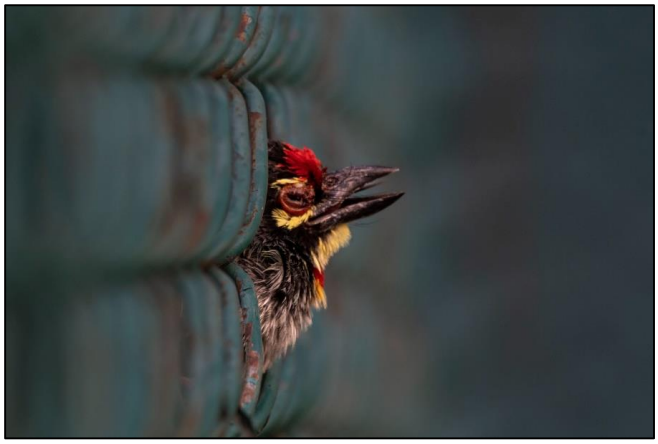
Rose-ringed Parakeet (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

By around 7:30AM the sun started shining a little more brightly, and we were running around to fill our water bottles with some cold water. The Zoo was well prepared for such situations and had drinking water facilities every 100 meters. Both paid and free drinking water was available, which is good.

A little further down, we were greeted by a bunch of Spotted Deer, and some Emus foraging and running around. We also got to see some kingfishers and Black Kites in the same area. Eventually after the long walk, we reached the Safari zone. Unfortunately that was still not open and the kids were drained of energy too.

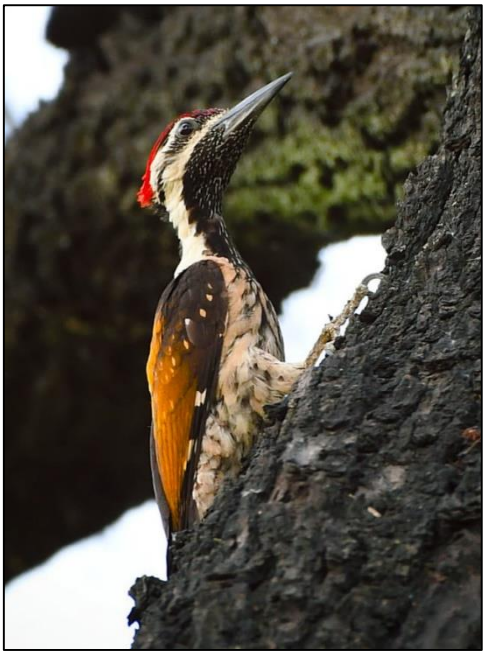
Oriental Magpie Robin female (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

We started our return walk and that is when we noticed a fight between two Barbets. One of them seemed to be injured and eventually settled down on the ground fully exhausted and no longer moving. We were a little skeptical about it, but still approached the bird with caution. We poured some water on it, hoping to cool it down and give it time to recoup. After about 15 minutes, we were happy to see it fly and sit on the fence, where it also gave some time and posed for the photographers.



Coppersmith Barbet (Photo: Gokul Krishna Addanki)

Mugger aka Marsh Crocodile (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)



Black-rumped Flameback (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

By 8:30AM, the Zoo had officially opened for the general public, and we saw the crowd size slowly and steadily increasing in the area. It was also getting hot with the soaring sun and kids were also tired, as they had been walking since 6:00AM now. We all started our walk back to the main gate with a few good pictures and a lot of memories to take back home.

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

(From Instagram, April 11, 2023)

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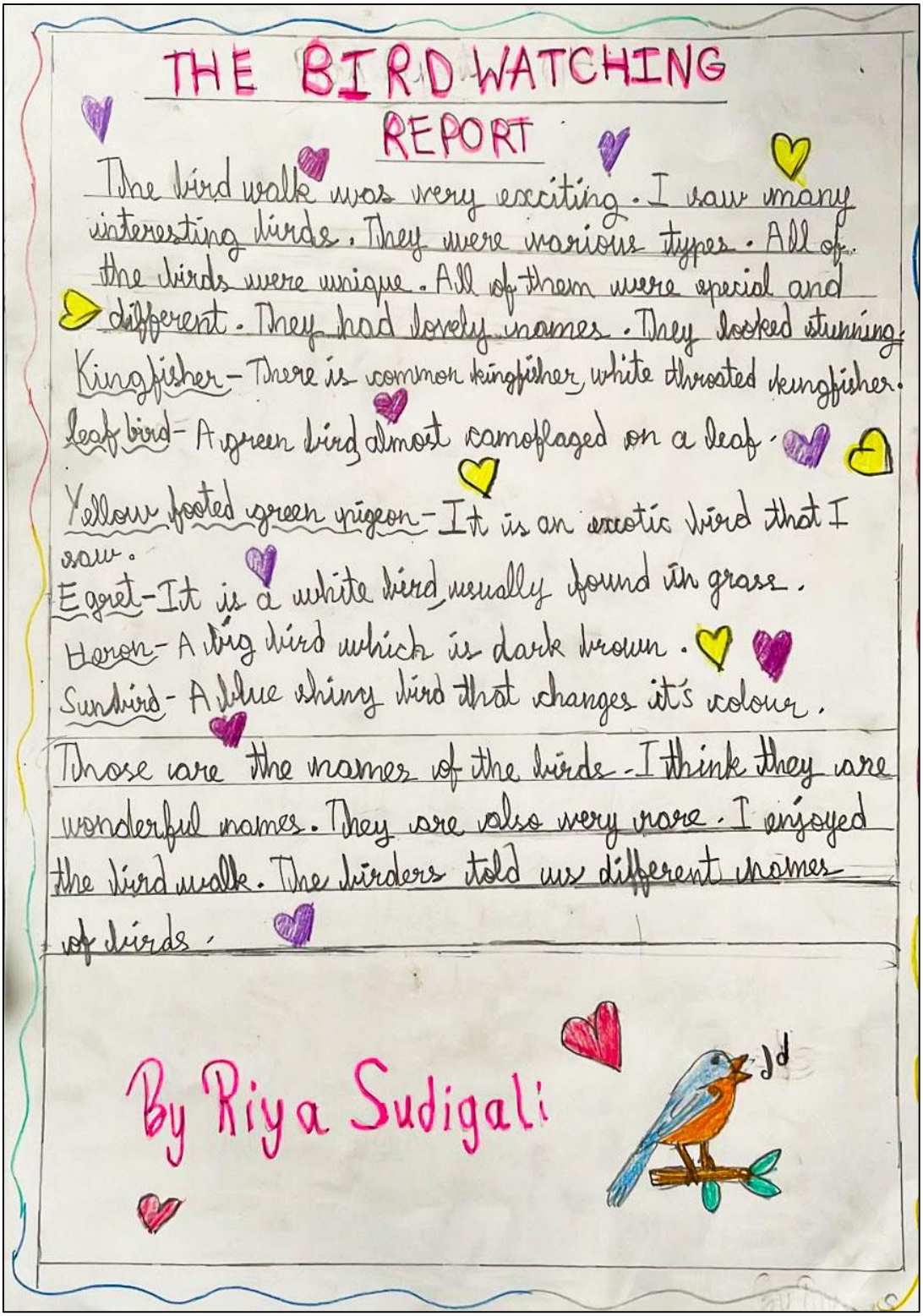
DAMAGUNDAM DIARIES
Report: Damagundam Reserve Forest, April 23, 2023

Editor's note

During the field trip to Damagundam in April 2023, it was gratifying to note that several children were among those present. An impromptu 'trip report writing challenge' was announced for the children, with a Deccan Birders T-shirt and cap up for grabs. We received some very beautiful entries from six children: Kavisree, Kripa, Mytri, Kripa, Riya and Virat. Of these, keeping various factors in mind, Riya's report was adjudged to be the best. The same is reproduced below.



THE BIRD WATCHING REPORT

The bird walk was very exciting. I saw many interesting birds. They were various types. All of the birds were unique. All of them were special and different. They had lovely names. They looked stunning.

Kingfisher - There is common kingfisher, white throated kingfisher.

Leaf bird - A green bird almost camoflaged on a leaf.

Yellow footed green pigeon - It is an exotic bird that I saw.

Egret - It is a white bird usually found in grass.

Heron - A big bird which is dark brown.

Sunbird - A blue shiny bird that changes it's colour.

Those are the names of the birds. I think they are wonderful names. They are also very rare. I enjoyed the bird walk. The birders told us different names of birds.

By Riya Sudigali

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Grey-headed Lapwing (*Vanellus cinereus*)

Grey-headed Lapwing (Chennai, February 04, 2023)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Charadriidae
Genus: *Vanellus*
Species: *V. cinereus*
Size: 34-37 cm

Description & distribution: The Grey-headed Lapwing, also known as Grey-headed Plover, is possibly the only member of the lapwing family that breeds in northeast China and Japan. The bulk of the population from the mainland winters south to India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Taiwan and parts of North and South Korea, whereas the Japanese population winters at least partly in in southern Honshu Island of Japan. Vagrants have been seen in Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Sri Lanka. In India, it is seen mainly in the northern, central and northeastern parts of the country, but there are regular sightings of small numbers as far south as Tamil Nadu. During migration, it travels mainly during the day, in large flocks and accompanied by juvenile birds.

The adult Grey-headed Lapwing has a bluish-grey head, neck and upper breast, upperparts are ashy brown and underparts are white, separated from the upper breast by a broad black breast band. Bill is yellow with a black tip, irises are reddish-orange (reddish-brown in juveniles) with a yellow eye-ring, and legs are yellow. Male and female birds are similar, but the male is slightly larger. Juvenile birds lack (or have a less distinct) black breast band, and the head and upperparts are pale brown rather than bluish-grey. In flight, lower back and rump show white, and the white tail shows a broad, black preterminal band. A striking contrast is seen between the black primaries, white secondaries and brown upperwing coverts.

Habitat & behaviour: The Grey-headed Lapwing frequents tropical and subtropical flooded grasslands, wetlands, swamps, marshes, rivers and riverbeds, streams and creeks. It is also seen in cultivated fields (e.g. paddyfields), flooded agricultural lands and flooded pasturelands and meadows. Its diet consists mainly of invertebrates like insects (aquatic or otherwise), small fish, worms, shrimp and molluscs, taken from shallow, muddy waters or from inside wet mud. The call is a *'kik'*, *'kerrit'* or *'chee-it'*, loud and sharp like most lapwings.

Nesting: In its breeding grounds, the Grey-headed Lapwing breeds generally between March and August. The nest is a shallow depression on the ground, lined with stems or blades of grass. The Grey-headed Lapwing is monogamous and highly territorial, but sometimes two or more breeding pairs may form a defensive flock and, in the event of an intruder coming near, neighbouring pairs help drive it away by making alarm calls, flying in circles and launching attacks on the predator. The usual clutch consists of four pale green or brown eggs with dark speckles all over. Both male and female share incubation and parental duties.

Local name: The Grey-headed Lapwing is known as *'Titeeri'* or *'Titori'* in Hindi (a generic name used for most lapwings), and *'Salang'* in Manipuri.

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